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College Campuses and Social Media Platforms as Venues for Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and Online Political Efficacy: The Case of the Israel-Gaza Conflict

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Abstract

The present study examines college students' (N = 267) use of social media as a source for news, doomscrolling, and political communication in relation to the Israel-Gaza Conflict, as well as antisemitism, Islamophobia, and experiences of religious prejudice. A framework derived from the theory of negativity was tested via a survey, which uncovered a strong link between antisemitism and Islamophobia. Implications for later work, international conflict, and religious prejudice are discussed.

Keywords: doomscrolling, Israel-Gaza conflict, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, theory of negativity, social media

Introduction

Tensions between Israelis and Palestinians erupted on October 7, 2023, when a surprise attack by Hamas was unleashed on southern Israel. The attack on community neighborhoods (i.e., kibbutzim) and a music festival led to the death of 1,200 people and 240 people taken hostage (AP, 2023). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded with a full-force ground invasion in Gaza, leading to constant missile strikes on Palestinian homes, hospitals, refugee camps, and food aid points (Lau, 2024; Reuters, 2024). By June 2025, the death toll in Gaza surpassed a staggering 60,000 people in Gaza, with nearly a third of the individuals under the age of 18 (AP News, 2025).

Conversations regarding this highly polarizing conflict have headlined news outlets, social media, peer-to-peer, group-to-group, and group vs. group interactions.[1] The international debate features criticism of the actions of both Hamas and the Israeli government, the consequences of which can give rise to religious hatred of Jews and Muslims alike. Specifically, the U.S. witnessed a 388% increase in antisemitic incidents since this time period last year (Anti-Defamation League [ADL], 2023), alongside a 182% jump in Islamophobic incidents (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2023). This increase in expressions of hate is thus ripe for scholarly inquiry.

College campuses represent critical venues for understanding these public opinion dynamics, given prominent reports of students and staff feeling “unsafe” due to their religion (ADL, 2023; AP News, 2024). Although individuals have taken to social media platforms to discuss these events–or otherwise support various constituencies–incidental exposure has been greater among social media users than non-users (Fletcher, Nielsen, 2017). The 74% daily news consumption rate among Gen Z–the predominant college demographic–suggests that they’re a key population of interest (American Press Institute, 2022).[2]

The share of users who regularly seek their news from the popular

[1] In the recent surge of college protests and rallies consisting of anti-Israel, pro-Palestine advocates–as well as anti-Hamas, pro-Israel advocates–tensions on college campuses have been heated. In December 2023, the presidents from the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Harvard were called to testify in front of a House committee regarding how they planned to combat antisemitism on their campuses. The president of UPenn stepped down after video of her testimony went viral via social media, in which she responded to a question asking if “calling for the genocide of Jews” on the UPenn campus constitutes bullying or harassment, by stating that it is a “context-dependent decision” (AP News, 2023).

[2] College students remain passionate about condemning Israel and the IDF as the Israel-Gaza conflict persists. In April 2024, student protests and encampments took over the nation at college campuses including in New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, California, New Mexico, Virginia, Illinois, and beyond (AP News, 2024). At Columbia University, for example, hundreds of New York City police officers entered the campus, arresting around 300 students. Students around the country have been suspended from school and face expulsion for their protests in support of Palestinian lives.

social media platform TikTok has quadrupled since 2020, reaching 44% (Pew Research Center, 2023). Another 47% of users between the ages of 18-29 regularly obtain their news from Reddit, 42% from Instagram, and 36% from Twitter. Gen Z, particularly college-aged users (roughly 18 - 22 years old) thus represent a key population of interest—embodying "epicenters of protest and activism"—having been mobilized through these social media platforms (e.g., Stewart, 2021). Maintaining connections with activists and political representatives via social media platforms increases exposure to persuasive messaging, political information, and attempts to directly mobilize users (Tang & Lee, 2013). Incidental news exposure can also promote audience learning (Lupia & Philpot, 2005; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010); this includes exposure to news media that the user did not directly seek out (e.g., a post from a friend).

The present study explores the role of social media platforms in audience processing of information during the Israel-Gaza conflict amongst a sample of American college students. Study data are based on a survey tapping ascriptive factors, alongside measures of Islamophobia, antisemitism, experiences of discrimination in the context of religious identification, doomscrolling, and online political self-efficacy. In particular, religious discrimination and prejudice are examined in tandem (Beck & Solomos, 2009), drawing from the theory of negativity (i.e., negativity bias; Lazarus, 2021).

First, we define the phenomenon of doomscrolling, along with its risk factors and implications for political information consumption. Next, we turn to online political efficacy and how social media may encourage its users to become more politically engaged, especially in discussions of religious discrimination; this includes the potential manifestation of antisemitism and Islamophobia from social media. An examination of negativity bias follows, emphasizing the role of valence on audiences' preferences for information consumption. Finally, we highlight the current political climate surrounding the Israel-Gaza conflict across U.S. college campuses, and Gen Z's use of social media for online activism, information dissemination, and opinion formation.

Understanding Doomscrolling

A new entry in the Oxford English Dictionary in the year 2020 (Salisbury, 2023), doomscrolling is defined as the compulsive consumption of negative, timely news online (Salisbury, 2023; Sharma et al., 2022). Doomscrolling stems from the desire to stay up-to-date with negative news stories that have potential relevance to the self and others (especially during times of crisis or uncertainty) into an excessive, compulsive scrolling of news feeds (Salisbury, 2023; Sharma et al., 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021); even when

exposure to the news stories makes the viewer feel worse, they experience difficulty in stopping (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

This is not to say that doomscrolling is directionless or a simple addictive practice; rather, it can be seen as a form of self-care where media consumers attempt to mitigate the uncertainty and anxiety associated with current disasters (Salisbury, 2023). Most catalysts of doomscrolling involve external events/crises (Salisbury, 2023), which makes sense when considering its emergence as a prevalent mental health concern since the COVID-19 pandemic (Satici et al., 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Equating doomscrolling with paranoid reading and hypervigilance evokes associations with anxiety disorders accompanying the repetitive behaviors of scanning information, waiting, and checking again (Salisbury, 2023).

Research supports the link between doomscrolling and mental health consequences (Satici et al., 2022). Doomscrolling leads to increased anxiety (Shabahang et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2022), decreased positive affect (Sharma et al., 2022) and depression (Shabahang et al., 2023); the practice can also intensify worrisome thoughts about the future and feelings of hopelessness (Shabahang et al., 2023). Several variables can increase one's pursuit of doomscrolling. In terms of demographic characteristics, men (Shabahang et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2022), younger adults (Satici et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022) and lower socio-economic status users (Satici et al., 2022) are more likely to doomscroll.

Personality traits can also influence these processes. In particular, doomscrolling has been negatively related to conscientiousness (Satici et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022) extraversion, and agreeableness (Satici et al., 2022), and positively related to self-control, cynicism (Sharma et al., 2022) and neuroticism (Satici et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). The probability of doomscrolling is increased by (1) the frequency of social media use (whether passive, habitual, addictive or for specific purposes such as for news surveillance or online vigilance) and (2) individual patterns of social media use (such as FOMO, problematic use, sensation-seeking, and negativity bias; Satici et al., 2022; Shabahang et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2022).

Political engagement has also been found to increase the likelihood of doomscrolling (Sharma et al., 2020), with users consuming content from opposing political parties (Haselswerdt & Fine, 2023). Satici et al. (2022) found that only Twitter was significantly related with doomscrolling, further verifying the notion that the site was viewed as a news source more than other social media sites, the use of which has been linked to online political efficacy. Doomscrolling has been intensified by social contexts (such as natural disasters or

political uprisings; Sharma et al., 2022), technological affordances (precisely tailored and curated social media algorithms that increase stickiness; Sharma et al., 2022), and the website itself (Satici et al., 2022). These technological affordances of social media, specifically how the contemporary social media feed is nonchronological and tailored to users' past scrolling behavior (Sharma et al., 2022), are attributed for the "endless scrolling functions" (George et al., 2024, p. 21) of social media.

Online Political Efficacy

Focusing on the role of social media in stimulating political discourse, Sasaki (2016) observed that use of the Internet can provide users with a sense of political empowerment, and in turn motivate participation in politics. Conceptually, political efficacy is defined as "feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell et al., p. 187). Political efficacy, or political self-efficacy, has been studied in various contexts. A survey of college students conducted by Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) concluded that political self-efficacy and situational political involvement, the perceived relevance of a specific issue at any given moment or time, were positively related to attention to "traditional Internet sources" (i.e., paid professionals), but not to social media as a source. Mou et al. (2013) found that self-efficacy predicted use of the Internet channels for political information among college students.

However, our understanding of the role that social media plays in political engagement remains incomplete, owing to the ever-changing nature of both social media and the volatile nature of political subjects. This behavior has been extended by Sasaki (2016) to conceptualize online political efficacy, which can inform our understanding of the relationship between the mediated environment, online, and political efficacy. In the present context, Hajira et al. (2024) reported that discrimination was negatively related to general self-efficacy. Stapleton and Wolak (2024) found that higher levels of internal political efficacy were linked to greater affective polarization. More broadly, Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis reported a correlation coefficient of .8, indicating a significant positive relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life. Thus, we conceptualize social media as a tool in a larger toolbox for individuals to participate in political discourse, particularly in the context of religious discrimination.

Understanding Distinct Religious Discrimination

Antisemitism

Antisemitism refers to this discourse in specific, or echoes of themes within it. Klug (2004) posits that this same anti-Jewish rhetoric is seen whether the identity characteristic of Judaism is presented racially, nationally, or ethnically. Such hatred was given the name in 1879 by German journalist Wilhelm Marr, referred to as the patriarch of antisemitism (Zimmerman, 1986), who founded an organization 'Antisemiten-Liga' (League of Anti-Semites) based on a platform of Jewish hostility (Klug, 2004).[3] Importantly, the present study distinguishes (i.e., does not conflate) criticism of the Israeli government with antisemitism.

Some 80 years after Nazi Germany utilized newspapers, radio, and movies to disseminate antisemitic propaganda, antisemitic rhetoric is mimicked decades later on tablets, Apple computers, and iPhones (Baugut, 2022). Hübscher and von Mering (2022) documented the ways in which antisemitism on social media appears as videos, vlogs, memes, gifs, and comments, and can often subsume subconscious learning. Outrageous content, like Holocaust denial, creates engagement in the form of likes, dislikes, comments, and shares, which is ultimately profitable (Lanier, 2018).

In 2017, the U.S. witnessed a resurgence of extremist racism. 'Unite the Right' was a rally made up of hundreds of alt-right activists marching through the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia shouting "Jews will not replace us"; one even murdered an anti-racist activist by driving his car through the crowd (Hübscher & von Mering, 2022). Drawn from Nazi ideology, the demonstrators maintained an active online presence via the *Daily Stormer* and shouted slogans like "blood and soil," alongside anti-Black slurs.

Opinion leaders and celebrities have also contributed to religious hatred online. In 2022, the rapper Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) went viral for his remarks blaming Jewish media for "owning the Black voice," especially in the music industry, stating that he was "#MeToo-ing" the Jewish culture" (ADL, 2023). This suggests a possible link between a figure of robust social influence and subsequent displays of replicated or ignited prejudice. Weimann and Masri (2021) found a 41% increase in antisemitism posts on TikTok, a 912% increase in antisemitism comments from 2020-21, and a 1,375% increase in antisemitism usernames. An antisemitic song

[3] About 30 years later, Germany's political system, as led by the Nazi Party, transitioned from socialism and communism towards anti-Semitic ideology, ruling as a one-party, totalitarian dictatorship for over 10 years (Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2020). Portraying Jews as Germany's true enemy, Nazi propaganda popularized this prejudicial sentiment, gaining momentum for the organization of the mass slaughter of 6 million Jews during the *Holocaust.*

about Jewish people being murdered in Auschwitz, for example, was accessed worldwide over six million times. The consistency of longstanding anti-religious rhetoric and extreme levels of hatred pervades variegated online platforms, even extending to Islamophobia.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is defined as baseless hostility towards Islam and resulting xenophobia targeted towards Muslims that is mainly characterized by fear (Lee et al., 2009). This fear originates from conspiracy theories that have cemented Muslims as a threat to the Western world (Abdel-Fadil, 2023; Abduljaber & Kalin, 2019; Farokhi, 2021; Lauwers, 2019; Sealy, 2021), owing to their strategy to take over "from within" through immigration, high birth rates, and terrorist attacks. Despite these conspiracies, Islamophobia is not exclusively found in the West, but rather experienced all over the world.

A primary concern with the conceptualization of Islamophobia involves the distinction between religious bigotry and cultural racism (Lauwers, 2019; Lee et al., 2009; Sealy, 2021), reflecting the racialization of Muslims/Islam (Lauwers, 2019). This is manifested, for example, through the interchangeable use of "Muslim" and "Arab," both in the outside world and in published research (Lee et al., 2009), as well as through the attribution of certain defining markers to Muslims such as Middle Eastern names, skin color, use of the Arabic language, or cultural practices that essentially denote a distinct ethnicity/region (Lauwers, 2019; Sealy, 2021). To wit, Islamophobia is thought of as a weaponized form of racism that hides behind the cloak of anti-religious sentiment (Lauwers, 2019); conceptual clarity is thus increasingly important in critically accessing and discussing such bigotry in ways that ultimately influences public policy and opinion (Lauwers, 2019).

Islamophobia is not just disseminated through mainstream media messages; on social media sites, hate speech targeting Muslims is widespread and community guidelines are not keeping up with the amount of negative, sometimes fake stories aimed at increasing negative anti-Muslim sentiment (Abdel-Fadil, 2023; Farokhi, 2021). Eckert et al.'s (2021) study of 61 Muslim participants uncovered almost unanimous agreement that they were on the receiving end of Islamophobia more frequently online than in person; these hateful interactions increased significantly after news stories featuring Muslims or mentions of terrorist attacks.

Online Islamophobia is not organic, but rather strategically disseminated (Farokhi, 2021), with right-wing groups in the U.S. and

Europe alike using rhetorical styles and sticky objects, such as images of hijab and minarets, in their social media posts to elicit strong emotional cues (Abdel-Fadil, 2023). The words and images used in these posts revolve around themes of dehumanization, exclusion and undesirability, threat and danger to society, incompatibility with the West, infection to humanity/cancer/disease, death cult, unworthiness, subversiveness, terrorism, and deserving of death, making Muslims more vulnerable to attacks, detainment, and deportation (Farokhi, 2021).

Research (e.g., Aduljaber & Kalin, 2019; Lee et al., 2009) has presented evidence that, simply, contact with at least one Muslim in real-life significantly decreases Islamophobia. This demonstrates the power of mediated Islamophobia and of social media in contributing to polarization, and the need for people to come together to establish real-life relationships and mitigate the dissemination of hate. These processes can be better understood in the context of negativity theory and related identity dynamics.

Negativity Bias

Ito el al. (1988) explored the influence of negative vs. positive information on evaluation processes. Recorded event-related brain potentials during experiments that exposed participants to affectively neutral, positive, and negative images revealed that negative images stimulated more brain activity than neutral or positive images. Three years later, Rozin and Royzman (2001) coined the term negativity bias to describe the innate and learned general bias of humans to emphasize negative objects, and posited four types of negativity bias: negative potency (keeping magnitude equal, negative objects are more salient than positive ones), steeper negative gradients (perceived negativity of a negative event increases as its timing approaches), negativity dominance (ambiguous objects are more likely perceived as negative), and negative differentiation (negative objects are more complex and require more cognition; consequently, they are more memorable than positive ones). Negativity bias has been linked to judgements of truth: in experiments where participants were exposed to statistical statements with positive vs. negative frames, negatively-framed information was deemed more truthful than positively-framed information (Hillbig et al., 2009). This bias has also been found to influence the social transmission of information: unambiguous negative news stories survived better across transmission chains than did positive ones (Bebbington et al., 2017).

Several studies have explored how individual characteristics can make an individual more prone to negativity bias. In terms of gender, men have been found to exhibit higher arousal, present higher recognition memory scores, and report higher comprehension

scores for negatively framed news stories, versus positive ones (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006); women have reported levels of negativity bias in news selection (NBNS) that are significantly lower than those of men (Bachleda et al., 2020). Research also shows that negativity bias declines with age, with younger adults reporting stronger neural reactions to negatively-valenced images than positive ones (Kisley et al, 2007), and older adults recalling and paying more attention to positive objects more than negative ones (Carstensen & DeLiema, 2018). This positivity effect has been theorized to signify a shift in motivation and an evolutionary development that provides benefits (remembering positive information, emotional stability) for the survival and success of a group (Carstensen & DeLiema, 2018).

In terms of political orientation, conservatives are more physiologically responsive, psychologically sensitive, and attentive to negative stimuli compared to liberals; this may be due to the fact that negative stimuli such as harsh treatment of criminals and immigration roadblocks match up well with typical conservative beliefs (Hibbing et al., 2014). Hibbing et al. (2014) note that the influence of conservative orientations on negativity bias has been confirmed across a wide range of methodologies and samples, and that no published research study has presented the opposite conclusion (that liberals are more prone to negativity bias than are conservatives). This relationship has also been found in the context of news selection. For example, in Bachleda et al.'s (2020) campaign-period panel survey measuring NBNS, U.S. respondents who held more conservative political ideologies reported higher levels of NBNS than their liberal counterparts.

The role of negativity bias has also been explored in interactions with online political news. In Van der Meer et al.'s (2020) online survey experiment, U.S. respondents were significantly more likely to select negatively framed online political news stories than positive ones. In this same vein, Robertson et al.'s (2023) analysis of over 105,000 news headlines from the self-branded "positive" online news outlet Upworthy.com–garnering over 370m overall impressions and 5.7m clicks–revealed that news headlines containing negative words were significantly more likely to be clicked on than those with positive words. This link between negative language and higher consumption rates was found to be strongest for Government & Economy news stories.

The research and theory reviewed above suggests that negatively framed information triggers the negativity bias, which in turn leads to increased memory, news selection, and online engagement. The proposed conceptual model assumes that one's reported religious discrimination increases the effect of the negativity bias and thus

increases political efficacy. We further assume that exposure to negatively framed information, news selection and recall are positively related to the processes shaping the negativity bias.

As for the relationship between political efficacy and antisemitism/Islamophobia (i.e., the "phobias"), Ysseldyk et al.'s (2014, p. 347) work suggests that "religious discrimination was perceived as especially harmful and evoked more individual and collective action-taking," a concept that tracks closely with external political self-efficacy (Mou et al., 2013). Based on that assumption, we posit that level of religious discrimination would encourage political efficacy, which in turn would be inversely related to the phobias.

Based on the theoretical linkages between political self-efficacy, media use and involvement noted above (e.g., Mou et al., 2013), we assume that such engagement would moderate support for religious discrimination; more formally, we posit:

H1: Level of reported religious discrimination will be positively related to political efficacy.

H2a: Level of online political efficacy will be negatively related to antisemitism.

H2b: Level of online political efficacy will be negatively related to Islamophobia.

Social Media Activism: College Campuses and the Contemporary Political Climate

We assume that news audiences, particularly college students, will rely on social media for information, both as receivers and senders (i.e., their advocacy). Slogans such as #FreePalestine and #BringThemHome (Israeli hostages) went viral. Based on the literature and theory above, we expect that these conversations would lead to discussions of Judaism and Islam as they relate to the dominant religions on opposing sides of the conflict, and thus, conversations and surges in antisemitism and/or Islamophobia could arise.

Extending from that work, the present framework seeks to profile the current college-age, Gen Z demographic, and their online sense-making behavior concerning the Israel-Gaza conflict. We assume that the factors outlined above influence perceptions of religious injustice, which likely fueled much of the aforementioned campus anti-war unrest. Gen-Z participants are of interest, in particular, because they are more evenly split in terms of their favorable views towards Palestine (58%) and Israel (42%; Pew Research Center,

2022). Drawing from the theory and research reviewed above, we posit that:

H3a: Doomscrolling will be positively related to antisemitism.

H3b: Doomscrolling will be positively related to Islamophobia.

H4: Perception of social media platforms as important sources of news information will be positively related to online political efficacy.

Since research on the relationship between digital media use, antisemitism and Islamophobia remains exploratory, we pose the following research questions:

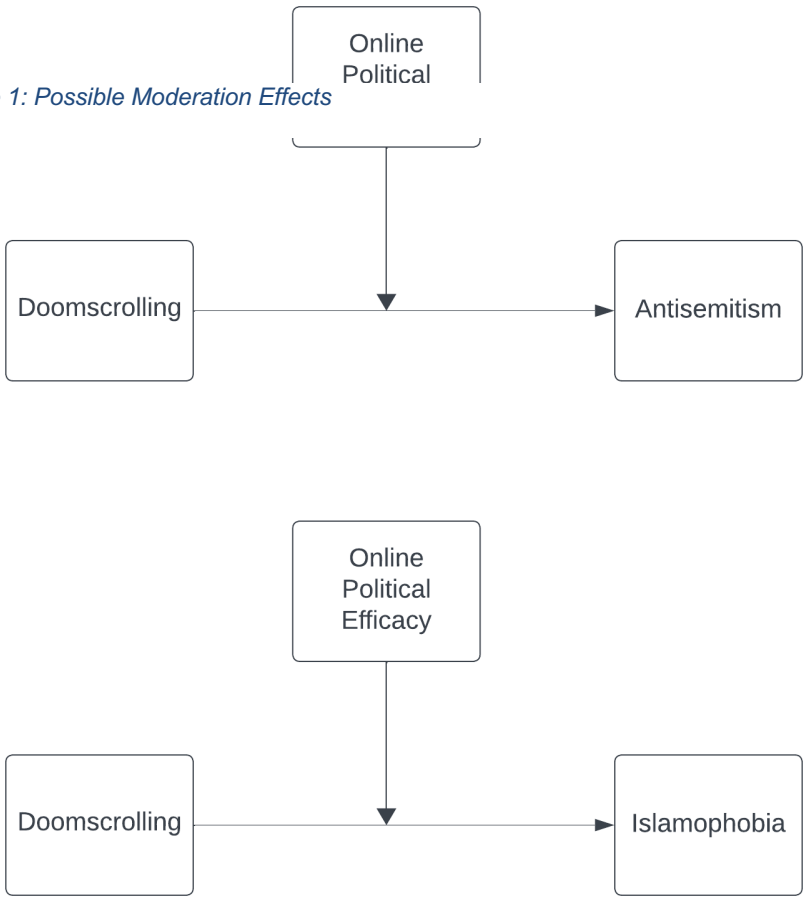


Figure 1: Possible Moderation Effects

RQ1: What is the relationship between the perceived importance of social networking sites as a source of news information and the social networking sites used the most by participants?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia?

RQ3: Does online political efficacy moderate the relationship

between doomscrolling and antisemitism, and doomscrolling and Islamophobia?

Methods

Participants

A total of 267 undergraduate students (M = 19.49, SD = 1.27) were recruited from an introductory communication course at a large northeastern university in the United States. Participants were granted course credit for their contribution. The majority of participants were White (47.4%, n = 139), identified as women (50.9%, n = 149), and Christian (44%, n = 129), with 19.1% Asian/Asian-American (n = 56), 8.9% African American (n = 26), and 9.2% Hispanic (n = 27). Almost 4% of the sample were Muslim (n = 11), 3.4% were Jewish (n = 10), and 1% (n = 3) of the sample was Middle Eastern. Five participants reported that their "country of origin" was Israel.

Procedure

Data collection took place during late November and early December of 2023. Participants were informed of the study through their introductory communication course, and they were provided a link to the information sheet and the online survey hosted on Qualtrics. Those who indicated their agreement to participate were then asked a series of demographic questions, followed by a series of measurement scales. The duration to complete the survey was about 15 minutes. Participants were awarded course credit for completion of the survey.

Measures

Unless noted, the means, standard deviations, Cronbach alpha reliabilities, and minimum/maximum values for study variables are presented in Table 1.

Demographic Information

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and countries of origin (i.e., in relation to themselves or their "parents, grandparents, great-grandparents").

Usage of Social Networking Sites

Adapted from Gearhart and Zhang (2015), usage of social networking sites was assessed using a scale that ranged from 1 "never" to 5 "multiple times a day." Participants were presented with the question: "How often do you use each of the following media

platforms?" The list of social networking sites included Facebook (M=1.97, SD=1.18), Instagram (M=4.30, SD=1.04), TikTok (M=4.16, SD=1.32), Twitter/X (M=2.38, SD=1.43), YouTube (M=3.49, SD=1.14), and Reddit (M=2.00, SD=1.16).

Perceived Importance of Social Media

Participants were presented with four statements such as “SNSs are important for keeping up with politics,” in which they could respond on a four-item continuum that ranged from 1 “not at all important” to 4 “very important.” This social networking sites use scale (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015) was adapted in a replicated set of four questions, but pertained to the Israel-Gaza conflict in specific (e.g., SNSs are important for recruiting people to get involved with the current Israel-Gaza war). A composite variable was created for each participant by taking the average of all four items. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach alpha reliabilities, and minimum/maximum values for this variable (as well as the variables described below) are presented in Table 1.

Doomscrolling

Excessive and mindless scrolling of news content was measured online by the Doomscrolling Scale (Sharma et al., 2022), a 15-item scale that we adapted to a 9-item scale that asks participants to evaluate aspects of their social media habits such as “I lose track of time when I read bad news on social media,” “I check social media in the morning to see what bad things have happened,” and “I feel like I am addicted to negative news.” Participants responded to each of the items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”. A composite variable was created for each participant by averaging the items together.

Online Political Efficacy

Civic engagement was measured through the Online Political Efficacy Scale (Sasaki, 2016). This 9-item scale includes such items as “By using the Internet, people like me can have more political power.” Using five-point scales, participants could answer in the range of 1 “agree” to 5 “disagree.” Before averaging items together to create a composite variable, we reverse coded responses so that higher values indicate higher levels of online political efficacy.

Islamophobia

Religious prejudice against Muslims was measured with the Islamophobia Scale from Lee and colleagues (2009). The 16-item measure consists of 5-point Likert scales (ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”). Items include statements that reflect

both avoidance behaviors/negative emotions towards Muslims, such as “Muslims should not be allowed to work in places where many Americans gather such as airports” and “Just to be safe, it is important to stay away from places where Muslims could be” (Affective-Behavioral subscale), as well as statements that reflect Islamophobic stereotypes such as “I believe that Muslims support the killings of all non-Muslims.” In prior literature, some scholars have simply summed the items to create a composite variable. We chose to take the average of all items instead, which is presented along with other descriptive statistics in Table 1. We present supplemental data here in-text for readers interested in comparing levels of Islamophobia observed in our study versus other studies that may have used the summed item approach: M=25.25, SD=12.81, minimum = 16, maximum = 72.

Antisemitism

Religious prejudice against Jews was measured with 13 items. Six of the items are from the Judeophobia antisemitism (JpAs) subscale, part of the Generalised Anti-Semitism Scale (Allington et al., 2022). Sample items include: “Compared to other groups, Jewish people have too much power in the media,” and “Jewish people talk about the Holocaust just to further their political agenda.” Our research team created an additional seven items inspired by questions on the Islamophobia Scale (Lee et al., 2009) described in the previous section. For example, one of the newly created items was: “I would support any policy that would stop the building of new temples or synagogues (Jewish places of worship) in the U.S.” When adapting the item, we substituted temples/synagogues in place of “mosques,” as was originally written in the Islamophobia scale. When adapting other items, reference to religion was simply replaced (i.e., having a Jewish vs. Muslim professor). Participants responded to the 13 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Religious Discrimination Scale

Experiences of discrimination due to religious identity was measured using the Religious Discrimination Scale (Allen et al., 2018), an 11-item scale that asks questions like “I felt inclined to keep my religious affiliation private,” and “Others hold negative stereotypes of people with my religion.” Participants were asked to “please rate how often during your life you have had the following experiences,” and responded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “always.”

Data Analysis

Using SPSS to examine interrelationships among variables, a series

of descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were performed. See Table 1. Next, we conducted four linear regression analyses. In the first regression, online political efficacy was the dependent variable, predicted by experiences of religious discrimination (H1) and perceived importance of social media (H4). See Table 2. In the second regression, antisemitism was the dependent variable, predicted by online political efficacy (H2a), doomscrolling (H3a), and their 2-way interaction (RQ3). See Table 3. The third regression had a similar structure. Islamophobia served as the dependent variable, predicted by online political efficacy (H2b), doomscrolling (H3b), and their two-way interaction (RQ3). See Table 4. The fourth regression was designed to assess the relationship between the two types of religious hate, with Islamophobia as the dependent variable, predicted by antisemitism. See Table 5.

All four regressions included gender (men=0; women=1) and race/ethnicity (White=0; BIPOC=1) as covariates, since these demographic variables were significantly associated with both forms of religious hate. Specifically, men reported higher levels of antisemitism and Islamophobia than women (M=2.48 vs. 2.28, t=2.83, p=.005 for antisemitism; M=1.75 vs. 1.44, t=3.00, p=.003 for Islamophobia). These results echo findings that men present higher levels of negativity bias than do women (Bachleda et al., 2020; Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006). Similarly, BIPOC participants reported higher levels of antisemitism and Islamophobia than White participants (M=2.55 vs. 2.21, t=-5.22, p<.001 for antisemitism; M=1.77 vs. 1.41, t=-3.45, p<.001 for Islamophobia). Note that BIPOC is an acronym referring to participants who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

	M	*SD*	α	min, max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	19.49	1.27	-	17, 32	-								
2 Gender[a]	-	-	-	-	-.13*	-							
3 Race/Ethnicity[b]	-	-	-	-	.03	-.01	-						
4 Doomscrolling	2.53	1.27	0.96	1, 7	.00	.01	.09	-					
5 Online Political Efficacy	3.06	0.51	0.63	1.56, 4.56	.06	.07	.02	.14*	-				
6 Antisemitism	2.37	0.53	0.96	1.00, 5.00	-.06	-.18**	.33***	.36***	-.19**	-			
7 Islamophobia	1.58	0.80	0.98	1.00, 4.50	-.03	-.19**	.22***	.26***	-.11	.77***	-		
8 Perceived Importance of Social Media	2.71	0.76	0.87	1.00, 4.00	.00	.11	.12	.26***	-.21***	-.04	-.12	-	
9 Religious Discrimination	1.73	0.85	0.98	1.00, 4.55	.06	-.12	.24***	.38***	.03	.34***	.34***	-.01	-

Note: **[a]1 = Men, 2 = Women. [b]0 = White participants, 1 = BIPOC participants.**

******p*<.05. *******p*<.01. ********p*<.001

Before conducting the regression analyses, the data was examined and it was determined that no assumptions were violated. Variance

Inflation Factors (VIF) are presented in the regression tables and indicate that multicollinearity was not of concern for any of the four models. A VIF above 5.00 is typically considered problematic. In our models, the VIFs ranged from 1.00 to 1.16.

Results

H1 predicted that the level of reported religious discrimination would be positively related to political efficacy. Results of the regression analysis revealed no significant relationship between the two variables (β=.04, p=.48) and so H1 was not supported. See Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Online Political Efficacy

	Model 1				Model 2			
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF
Race/Ethnicity[a]	0.00	0.07	0.00	1.00	-0.03	0.07	-0.03	1.08
Gender[b]	0.07	0.07	0.07	1.00	0.05	0.07	0.05	1.03
Religious Discrimination					0.03	0.04	0.04	1.08
SNS Importance					0.14	0.04	0.20**	1.03
Adjusted R^2			0.00				0.03	
F for change in Adjusted R^2			0.52				5.32**	
Note: [a]1 = Men, 2 = Women. [b]0 = White participants, 1 = BIPOC participants.								
*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001								

H2a focused on the relationship between online political efficacy and antisemitism. Drawing from the assumption that political self-efficacy could blunt antisemitism, we expected to observe a negative association between the two variables. In support of this hypothesis, online political efficacy was indeed negatively associated with antisemitism (β=-.27, p<.001); that is, those scoring higher on the efficacy measure self-reported lower levels of antisemitism. See Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Antisemitism

	Model 1				Model 2			Model 3				
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	B	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	B	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF
Race/Ethnicity[a]	0.35	0.07	0.33***	1.00	0.32	0.06	0.29***	1.01	0.30	0.06	0.28***	1.01
Gender[b]	-0.19	0.07	-0.18**	1.00	-0.19	0.06	-0.18**	1.01	-0.17	0.06	-0.16**	1.02
Online Political Efficacy					-0.22	0.06	-0.21***	1.02	-0.28	0.06	-0.27***	1.11
Doomscrolling					0.16	0.02	0.37***	1.02	0.16	0.02	0.38***	1.03
Online Political Effiacy x Doomscrolling									-0.16	0.04	-0.21***	1.10
Adjusted R^2			0.13				0.29				0.33	
F for change in Adjusted R^2			19.39***				27.72***				13.91***	
Note: [a]1 = Men, 2 = Women. [b]0 = White participants, 1 = BIPOC participants.												
*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001												

Similarly, H2b was supported. Online political efficacy was negatively associated with Islamophobia, and the relationship was statistically significant (β=-.17, p<.001). See Table 4.

Next, we focused on the relationship between doomscrolling and the two forms of religious hate. As predicted in H3a, doomscrolling was positively related to antisemitism (β=.38, p<.001). See Table 3. Doomscrolling was also positively related to Islamophobia (β=.28, p<.001), providing support for H3b. See Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Islamophobia

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	B	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF
Race/Ethnicity[a]	0.35	0.10	0.22***	1.00	0.32	0.10	0.20***	1.01	0.31	0.10	0.19**	1.01
Gender[b]	-0.30	0.10	-0.18**	1.00	-0.29	0.10	-0.18**	1.01	-0.27	0.10	-0.16**	1.02
Online Political Efficacy					-0.20	0.09	-0.13*	1.02	-0.27	0.10	-0.17**	1.13
Doomscrolling					0.18	0.04	0.27***	1.02	0.18	0.04	0.28***	1.03
Online Political Effiacy x Doomscrolling									-0.16	0.08	-0.13*	1.12
Adjusted R^2			0.08				0.15				0.17	
F for change in Adjusted R^2			11.18***				11.83***				4.39*	
Note: [a]1 = Men, 2 = Women. [b]0 = White participants, 1 = BIPOC participants.												
**p*<.05. ***p*<.01. ****p*<.001												

H4 predicted that perceptions of social media platforms as important sources of news information would be positively related to online political efficacy. This hypothesis was supported. Perceived importance of social media was positively associated with online political efficacy (β=.20, p<.001). See Table 2.

Turning to the research questions, RQ1 explored the relationship between the perceived importance of social networking sites as a source of news information and the usage frequency of various social networking sites. Significant relationships were found with use of Instagram (r(254)=.20, p=.002), TikTok (r(252)=.30, p=<.001), X (r(254)=.15, p=.021), and Reddit (r(252)=.21, p=<.001), indicating that heavy users of these platforms view them as important sources of news information.

The second research question explored the possibility of a relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia; results showed a significant, positive correlation between both of these religious phobias (r(241)=.77, p=<.001). In addition to this bivariate Pearson correlation, we assessed the relationship between the two types of religious hate using regression analysis, controlling for

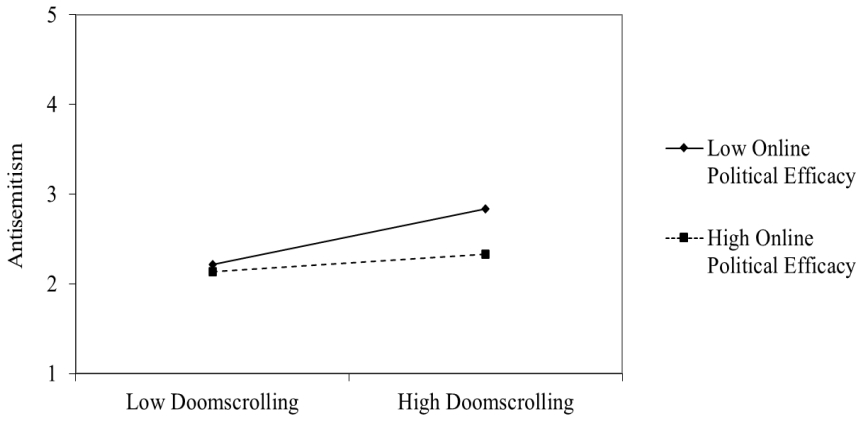
gender and race/ethnicity. The results of this analysis confirmed that antisemitism and Islamophobia were strongly related (β=.78, p<.001). See Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Association Between Antisemitism and Islamophobia

	Model 1				Model 2			
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF	*B*	*SE B*	β	VIF
Race/Ethnicity[a]	0.35	0.10	0.22***	1.00	-0.04	0.07	-0.03	1.12
Gender[b]	-0.29	0.10	-0.18**	1.00	-0.06	0.07	-0.04	1.04
Antisemitism					1.18	0.07	0.78***	1.16
Adjusted R^2			.07				.59	
F for change in Adjusted R^2			10.36***				305.41***	
Note: [a]1 = Men, 2 = Women. [b]0 = White participants, 1 = BIPOC participants.								
*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001								

RQ3 queried whether online political efficacy might moderate the relationship between doomscrolling and antisemitism, as well as the

Figure 2: Online political efficacy moderates the relationship between doomscrolling and antisemitism



relationship between doomscrolling and Islamophobia. First, we focused on antisemitism. To prepare the interaction term for inclusion in the regression model, both online political efficacy and doomscrolling were centered by subtracting the mean scores. The two centered variables were then multiplied together to create the interaction term. Results of the regression analysis showed that the interaction was indeed a statistically significant predictor of antisemitism (β=-.21, p<.001) and explained an additional 4% of the total variance. See Table 3. As participants' online political efficacy decreased, the relationship between doomscrolling and antisemitism strengthened. Said another way, the association between doomscrolling and antisemitism was stronger among participants scoring lower in online political efficacy, compared to participants high in online political efficacy. See Figure 2 for a plot of this interaction. When drawing the interaction plot, we selected focal values that corresponded to high and low levels of efficacy and

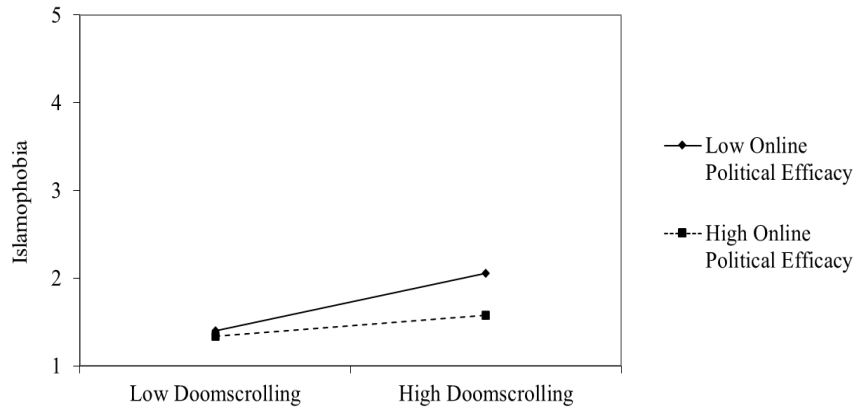
doomscrolling. More specifically, we chose to designate participants with scores one standard deviation above the mean as high. In contrast, participants scoring one standard deviation below the mean represented those low in the concept.

Similarly, we found evidence of a significant interaction between doomscrolling and online political efficacy when focusing on Islamophobia as the outcome (β=-.13, p=.04). Inclusion of the interaction term accounted for an additional 2% of the variance. See Table 4. The pattern of results was identical to what was observed in the context of antisemitism. Like before, the relationship between doomscrolling and antisemitism was stronger among participants scoring lower in online political efficacy, compared to participants high in online political efficacy. See Figure 3 for a plot of this interaction. These results suggest that a similar process occurs with both forms of religious hate.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the role of exposure to online discourse related to the Israel-Gaza conflict among Gen-Z–particularly doomscrolling–and its effect on attitudes towards Muslims and Jews. Results from a technology savvy sample of college students reveal broad support for a model suggesting that social media use would be positively related to political self efficacy. In particular, we examined religious discrimination and prejudice in tandem (Beck & Solomos, 2009), in light of the theory of negativity. The strongest relationship, linking antisemitism and Islamophobia,

Figure 3: Online political efficacy moderates the relationship between doomscrolling and Islamophobia.



corroborates past findings highlighting those similarities between the two phobias (Burke et al., 2020; Hafez, 2019; Lenz & Moe, 2020; Meer, 2013). Prejudice held against a given group is thus not exclusive to a particular religion, although current findings confirm past work that digital media exposure strengthens such beliefs. This

can be explained by the fact that people seek politically congenial content because it is mentally comforting to process information that confirms one's predispositions (e.g., Perloff, 2022); that is, the relationship between the two groups—which are being increasingly siloed via digital media–continues to shape stereotypes, community identities, online and offline hate crimes, and political conflicts.

As we interpret the theoretical significance of these results, it's useful to account for author orientations and reflexivity (e.g., Scharp & Thomas, 2019). In particular, the lead authors are cisgender women scholars. One author is Middle Eastern, identifies as Muslim, and is a native-born Egyptian, while the other is white, identifies as Jewish, and is Israeli. Our positionality sensitizes us to experiences and discourse surrounding religious prejudice, especially as they apply to college campuses and the Israel-Gaza conflict.

On balance, the amount of variance explained by the antisemitism model (33%), chiefly reflecting the influence of doomscrolling, compares favorably with past work addressing media influences on contemporary political issues (e.g., Mou et al., 2013). Although this provides general support for our propositions derived from the negativity bias approach identified here, including a similar dynamic for Islamophobia, the level of variance explained (17%) is scarcely half as much for that model. This raises an important question about the influence that doomscrolling plays in determining each of these "phobias." Perhaps these doomscrolling dynamics were more salient with antisemitism because it represents an older, more established phobia (e.g., Klug, 2004); that is, although American students may also harbor Islamophobic views, they may not feel as efficacious in understanding certain tenets or tropes associated with that, given the relatively greater pervasiveness of Judeo-Christian identity in the U.S., which Pew data placed above 90% as recently as the 1990s (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

In line with our expectation, as participants' online political efficacy decreased, the relationship between doomscrolling and antisemitism strengthened; that is, the association between doomscrolling and antisemitism was stronger among participants scoring lower in online political efficacy, compared to participants high in online political efficacy. This dynamic suggests that greater political efficacy (and, by implication, engagement) may help overcome the pull of antisemitic speech online (with Benton et al. (2022) noting, for example, that hate speech increased 4,778 times following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter). Given this increasingly toxic blogosphere, it will be important to repeat this work over time. Adams et al. (2023) note, for instance, that exposure to partisan digital channels reinforced incorrect narratives and persuaded viewers to

accept falsehoods.

This raises the question of whether exposure to an increasingly hate-filled blogosphere–presumably accessible to those scoring higher in political and/or online efficacy (e.g., Lin et al., 2015) may render heavier users more susceptible to antisemitic appeals. Stapleton and Wolak's (2024) found that those scoring higher in such efficacy are also more likely to accept discrimination against an out-group (e.g., opposing party) member; that is, affective polarization is maximized among "those who feel the most confident of their ability to influence politics" (p. 79). Later work could profitably monitor whether confirmation biases wrought by digital information silos, particularly among higher efficacy users, begin to erode the conventional benefits of political engagement in helping lower efficacy (or self-esteem) overcome religious discrimination.

In light of these trends, we call for social media platforms to expand their content moderation efforts–particularly in relation to religious prejudice–while denouncing (and vetting) such content. This call for enhanced content moderation arrives at an uncertain time for researchers and policymakers alike. Meta recently offered that they would "allow more speech by lifting restrictions on some topics that are part of mainstream discourse and focusing our enforcement on illegal and high-severity violations" (Kaplan, 2025, para 16), especially as plenty of "harmless" content leaves people "wrongly locked up in Facebook jail." Policymakers could use the linkages involving doomscrolling with anti-semitism and Islamophobia identified here to address social media policy related to religious and/or other sociocultural prejudice.

The present findings can also help shed light on notable Pew findings that point to a generational divide in support for Israel in the U.S., which stands at 69% for those aged 65+, but dips to 41% for those aged under 30 (Pew Research Center, 2022). Our college student sample is clearly situated in the latter demographic. We should of course take care to not conflate antisemitism with anti-Israeli (or anti-Netanyahu) sentiments (e.g., Golan & Chet, 2024), which is accounted for in the JpAs scale employed here. Still, this raises the issue of other emerging influences germane to college populations that may be shaping public opinion dynamics on this issue.

Paul (2023) recounts an influential editorial written in the *Stanford Daily* underscoring the prominence of critical race teachings–there and elsewhere–that may be reducing support for Israel among students (i.e., "critical race tourism," per Tobin, 2021). Cooper et al. (2021), however, reject that view, concluding that "(c)ritical race theory is not anti-Semitic, and it's not anti-Palestinian either" (para 1). Later research should proceed on these points, particularly as

fallout during the current Israel-Gaza conflict continues to frame debates among left-leaning voters/Democrats during the 2024 U.S. election campaign (e.g., Paul, 2023). In particular, follow-up work could profitably explore underlying social identity dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), utilizing samples that more fully represent adherents to the Abrahamic religious faiths.

Another factor crucial to this study was time. The static nature of the survey did not allow consistent updating of questions to keep up with the rapid pace of war developments in the Middle East and relevant events in the U.S. As such, a follow-up survey could help enhance our understanding of the shifts of attitudes, cognitions and behavior as respondents are being exposed to more information as the conflict continues to unfold. This is especially pertinent given that Gen Z's trust in U.S. news institutions is eroding (Hrynowski & Marken, 2023) as they turn to social media–30% from Facebook, 26% from YouTube, and 16% from Instagram–to get their news (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Finally, future research should further explore the affordances of each social media site visited frequently by respondents for news consumption. Understanding how formatted social media sites collect information and customize algorithms to present a certain side of a conflict to users is crucial, especially given the rise of information silos, divisiveness, advent of hate crimes, and algorithmic biases/censorship (e.g. Fahmy et al., 2024) that are an overall threat to society and democracy. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter), and YouTube are key to our understanding of engagement with political discourse online (i.e., discussion of political topics, events, and immersion into political contexts in a 'social' environment). Specifically, Gen Z represents a unique demographic in which this interaction between news and social media consumption is explored, as they are considered "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). 'Gen Zers' have never lived in a world without social media (as the first platform was created in 1997; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), and thus news consumption via social media serves an integral role in their daily media diets.

Despite the purposive use of a Gen Z sample whose racial and ethnic breakdown typified that of a large public university (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), very few respondents identified as Middle Eastern, Muslim, or Jewish. Future research could profitably utilize samples that include a large group of Jewish and Muslim college students to better understand their perspectives in relation to the recent rise in religious hatred, given our use of parallel theoretical perspectives like social identity theory. This is particularly critical, given our key finding that

the more religious discrimination an individual experiences, the more likely they were to exhibit antisemitism and Islamophobia. Utilizing a more diverse sample of respondents could help shed light on in-group and out-group sentiments related to the ongoing conflict.

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